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What a reporter must be

WHAT A REPORTER MUST BE

HELPS TO SUCCESS IN NEWSPAPER WORK

BY

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CLEVELAND, OHIO
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This little book is intended as a help to those who wish to engage in that interesting occupation, reporting for a daily newspaper. It was written for young women as well as for young men, since sex makes practically no difference in the requirements of a reporter.

What a Reporter must be

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It commonly has been supposed that newspaper men and newspaper women are born, not made. This is erroneous. Any man or woman of average intelligence and health may hope, through faithful application, to take up that most fascinating occupation, reporting, and gain an enviable degree of success. There are, however, certain qualities or traits of character which each aspirant should consider carefully before he determines to enter this field of labor.

Loyalty—First and most important of these is loyalty. Unless a young man is sure that he will be unswervingly loyal to the paper which he may represent he should not entertain one thought of becoming a reporter. A young woman proves no exception to the rule. Both may be required, even at the outset, to work under orders that are extremely distasteful to them. Under such conditions, want of loyalty makes a reporter valueless to his paper.

It is seldom that one needs to be a knight of chivalry to prove his loyalty. In fact a reporter may do many things

highly incompatible with his own superfine notions of courtesy. For his paper he may do that which he would not do for himself. He may deem it necessary, at times, to peek over transoms, listen at keyholes, hang on window sills and prowl around dooryards in order to get the "news" he has been sent after by his city editor. He may even conceal his identity, assume a false name and deny his business when he is working up an item. But in the office he must give a full and truthful account to his editor. He must describe conditions exactly as he found them, no matter what influences may have been brought to bear upon him to induce him to suppress or pervert the facts. A woman is, perhaps, more likely to prove disloyal than a man because her sympathies are more easily enlisted. Tears and pitiful entreaties may cause her to waver, but she should present a true statement of facts to her editor and let him decide what is to be published and what shall be suppressed.

Lest some of the methods of getting news referred to in the preceding paragraph be considered questionable, I would add that the supposed necessity for such methods is growing less every

day. The occupation of a reporter is now recognized everywhere as one that conflicts with no man's sense of honor.

Through loyalty a reporter keeps the confidence of his editor and is given important assignments. He may not be able to write as cleverly as others and he may not be as brilliantly original, but if he can be depended upon to use his best efforts in serving his employers his success is sure. The reason for this is plain. An editor must of necessity rely upon the word of the reporter for the truth of the news items.

On the so-called sensational papers there are editors who distort reports, but even on these papers the most valued reporter is he who tells his editor exact conditions of affairs. If the editor wants a condition enlarged he instructs the reporter accordingly, acting upon the statement that this loyal worker has but just given to him. Some high-priced reporters exaggerate, or enlarge on facts in accounts subsequently given to the public as true, but, of this class of reporters, those who are termed successful write "fake" upon their perverted copy before they hand it to their editor. The reporter who "fakes" (distorts

or manufactures) without his editor's cognizance cannot hold a position long upon any paper.

If the reporter suppresses facts, he places his paper at a disadvantage with its rivals. If he perverts his reports he may lead his editor to publish articles which may involve the paper in that newspaper office bugaboo, a libel suit, or cause it to lose thousands of subscribers.

It is the business of a reporter, as his name indicates, to report. The responsibility of publication rests with the editor. To the editor alone belongs the power of presenting to the public statements which deviate from facts.

As an incentive to the reporter himself, loyalty is invaluable. To feel that he will be true to his paper at any cost will give him necessary enthusiasm, a clear head and a stout heart.

News Sense—The indications are that the newspaper of the future will devote itself exclusively to the publication of news. Special features gradually are being discarded except by the Sunday papers. A regular staff, moreover, is employed to prepare these feature stories. The ordinary reporter, therefore, will devote himself more and more to news

gathering. To do this properly he must have a well defined news sense, or a "nose for news" as newspaper workers say. That is, the reporter must be able to discriminate between what is interesting and what is not, in the eyes of the public. He himself may have no interest whatever in the fact that Nancy Jones eloped with John Smith but he must be able to judge what proportion of the readers of his paper are likely to be interested in the elopement.

The reporter must be able to see instantly that which is startling either from its deep reaching effects, from the prominence of the persons affected, or from the rarity of the occurrence. For example, an accident may be of thrilling interest to a whole community because scores of lives are lost in a brief space of time. Again, an accident where but one person is injured may take precedence in a news sense over another where several deaths occur. For instance, if a statesman, a leader of congress, known to everyone in the United States, and to many on foreign shores, should meet with a serious, perhaps fatal accident, more readers would be interested in reading a full report of that than would

be in learning the details of a boiler explosion where a half dozen men unknown to the world beyond the limits of their own little circles, are killed. An accident that is important in a news sense on account of the rarity of its occurrence is exemplified in the case of a milkman who was driving alongside a vat of boiling tar, used in paving a street, when a cable car struck his wagon and tossed him into the tar, where he died before he could be extricated.

A reporter who has a well developed sense of news will follow out even a hint of such cases as those I have just mentioned, or others of similar importance, as keenly as a blood hound runs over the trail of a fugitive.

Oftentimes a reporter gains a clue to a great piece of news from the casual remark of some one he is interviewing on a comparatively trivial subject. Now if the news sense be wanting the words which give the hint fall on deaf ears and the reporter will have lost his opportunity to secure the important information.

Two young women, reporters on New York daily newspapers, were detailed by their respective editors to describe Children's Day exercises in the

Harlem Sunday schools. They chanced to go over the ground together. In one of the churches a conversation was overheard relative to the evening services, when a clergyman and twelve of his followers were to renounce their faith and become members of a new denomination. One of the reporters had a "nose for news" and recognized the importance of the information. She hastily finished the work in hand, went to the pastor of the church, gained the names of the clergyman and his followers as well as other particulars, returned to the office of her paper and submitted a complete report to her editor. As a consequence, in addition to writing her account of Children's Day, she had the opportunity to prepare a leading article for the next morning's issue and enabled her paper to publish news that its rivals did not have, or, in newspaper parlance, she secured a "beat" or "scoop." This was because she recognized that the chance information was of far more importance than the work to which she had been assigned. Her companion was without this news sense. She paid no attention to the conversation that she heard in the church but went painstak-

ingly on with the duties which had been apportioned to her. She is still reporting at fifteen dollars a week while the first young woman has won her way to the head of a department on her paper.

The person who has this news sense as a natural gift has the advantage over his fellow reporters in the beginning of his career. He may follow a short and easy path to success. But the man or woman who wishes to become a reporter and who does not have this news sense inborn need not be discouraged. The ability to scent news can be acquired by diligent application and observation. The road to success may be steeper and longer but it is no less sure.

PERSEVERANCE—It is an unwritten rule of the newspaper office that a reporter is not expected to return until he has verified and secured the details of the news item he is sent out to investigate, or is able fully to satisfy his editors that there is no foundation for the rumor. The reporter must take for his daily rule that ancient saying: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again." He must not acknowledge, even to himself, that there is such a thing as failure. When he has tried all the ordinary means of

securing the desired information without success he begins to devise new methods. He weighs every opportunity that chance throws in his path. He tries a sudden sally, an unexpected question or a shrewd guess. No matter how often he seems to be defeated, he plots and plans with the calm assurance in his mind that if there is any important bit of news in the case he will be sure to get it.

To do this he sometimes works all day and all night. He goes without his regular meals, snatching a bite from a sandwich and gulping down a cup of coffee if he gets a chance. Bodily fatigue and mental weariness are unnoticed. Life even may be jeopardized in the reporter's enthusiasm.

Perseverance also means the ability to pass hours of inaction, to be on watch or guard half a day or longer. This is sometimes harder to do than to work as hard as one's powers permit. It is an art to be able to wait idly from two to three hours in the ante-office of some great man and, when finally admitted to his presence, to appear as unwearied and bright as if there had not been a moment's delay.

The reporter must be persevering in other ways as well as in gathering the material for the news item. He should constantly try to improve his copy. He should endeavor to be as correct as possible. He may find in writing up a certain article that there is doubt in regard to the spelling of a name, or about the date of a certain occurrence. It is his duty to search records until he has decisive proof in favor of one way or the other, or has exhausted his resources.

It must be understood of course that in cases of great haste, where the report of an accident or similar piece of news must be written within a limited number of minutes to insure its appearance in an edition of the paper which is almost ready to go to press, the reporter cannot exercise such minute care. But the ordinary work of a reporter, while performed as quickly as possible, requires painstaking perseverance in its preparation. This is recognized on some of the greatest dailies when fines are imposed for mistakes in spelling proper names and when suspensions are made for the misuse of titles or for similar offenses.

The efficient reporter early learns the importance of perseverance. He

wastes no time in idle speculation but at once gives his best efforts and thoughts to the task in hand. Through the same habit he becomes able to hand in perfect copy. To the old reporter, perseverance has made molehills of many things which seemed mountains to him as a new reporter.

Observation—It is not enough, however, to scent out a news item, and to persistently persevere in getting a report of it. It must be written up in a manner which will catch and hold the attention of the reader. The reporter can employ no better agent for this purpose than the habit of close observation. Those who train themselves to see and hear the most will have the greatest fund of information. From this fund they will be able to draw the material for the touch of pathos, the flash of humor, or the fine, but concise description which distinguishes the well written article from the mediocre one.

It is the ability to see beyond the point of view of the ordinary observer that marks the firstclass reporter. He not only sees what has happened, for instance, but he also observes the causes which led to the occurrence and the

manner in which it took place. In fact, through observation, he takes a series of mental photographs which afterward pass before his analytical faculties like the pictures of the kinetoscope. In writing his report he thus is able to choose the points which will be of most interest to the public.

Observation serves the reporter a double purpose when he once has gained the habit. Aside from being necessary to a well written report it is helpful as a news gathering ally. It teaches the reporter to investigate anything which is out of the ordinary in any particular. Every peculiarity, mechanical, natural, or artificial is based upon some reason. This reason is interesting almost nine times out of ten, even if the peculiarity itself is not. To the person who has acquired the habit of exact observation the slightest deviation from the ordinary is at once apparent. The next step is to find out why such a thing is, or has happened and what effect it will have in the future. Then the reporter has his news item in a nutshell.

Education—A college education is a great advantage to any one who wishes to become a reporter. It is not

essential, however, to success in the reportorial line. In fact, there are cases where both men and women have risen to enviable positions, with unusual salaries, who had at the outset but the mere rudiments of an education. In some other cases there are reporters whose written matter requires the most careful handling by the copy readers to weed out mistakes in grammar, orthography and punctuation. Such reporters never have overcome the disadvantages of a too limited education, yet their superior news sense enables them to retain positions on the best papers.

It must not be supposed for a moment, though, that lack of education is in favor of the would-be reporter just because some have succeeded without the advantages of proper training. Perhaps with thorough education these same persons might have been distinguished in the highest fields of literature.

A reporter ought to have a good high school training, or its equivalent, in practical knowledge of language, literature and science. He should be able to write sentences grammatically, to spell correctly and to punctuate properly. With so much of an education

as the foundation it is not difficult to acquire all else that is necessary. It must be remembered that not the number of books which the student pores over but the amount of knowledge he acquires and retains is the measure of his education.

A reporter is a constant student. He gives his attention to all subjects. One day he may be assigned to prepare an article on a filtration plant. To do this he must master the principles upon which the plant in question works, know how it differs from other filtration plants and so on until he has a complete knowledge of filtration. The next day he may be sent to report a horse show or a lecture on theosophy. In either case he must learn much in order to write a little intelligently.

The college bred man, or woman, for this reason, has the advantage in doing reportorial work. He has a broader foundation to build upon. His fund of information is deeper and it is not necessary for him to consult dictionaries, encyclopedias and atlases so often as the reporter without college training must do. The college man brings a better disciplined mind to bear upon his

work. Yet I would emphasize the statement made above that lack of education need debar no one from the business of a reporter. With an average amount of brains and pluck that hinderance to success may be removed.

PRACTICAL HINTS—Be modest. The forward reporter may flourish for a time but his downfall is certain.

Be gentlemanly. Courtesy wins favor, and popularity will bring more news items than rude keenness can ferret out.

Be womanly. An aggressive manner is even more disagreeable in woman than in man. A dignified yet frank woman can walk in any path of life she may choose without fearing unpleasant experiences. By womanly is not meant womanish. Many women stand in their own path to success by relying on the idea that they are women and therefore to be treated with indulgence, instead of recognizing that merit and the ability to do real work are the true factors which will enable them successfully to compete with their fellow reporters.

Be honest. Where trickery wins one piece of news straight forwardness gains a dozen.

Be frank. Deal openly with the world but be reserved in regard to personal affairs and office business.

Carefully weigh the question of becoming a reporter. Consider on one hand that a reporter ought to have a brain of steel, a frame of iron, an unswerving will, indomitable pluck and unflinching courage. On the other hand he will find no other business more fascinating, more broad in scope or more generally instructive. The remuneration is fair. An ordinary reporter earns as much as the average bank clerk and a good one much more. If you decide to become a reporter stick to your business until you make a success of it.

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